

Perceptions towards Internet Celebrity on Purchase Intention among China's Undergraduates

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With the growth of online business and advancement of social media technologies, recruiting internet celebrities in e-commerce businesses is becoming prevalent in China. Internet celebrities have shown their substantial social impact and commercial value, contributing to overall retail sales of 8% in 2020, compared to only 0.6% in 2017. During the COVID-19 pandemic, e-commerce has been the retail channel to experience rapid growth in China's fast-moving consumer good industry. This has created plenty of opportunities for internet celebrities to gain brand collaboration with marketers. Research investigating the impact of influencer marketing on Chinese undergraduates has been limited. This is important because Chinese Generation Z are more brand loyal when they are engaged with a brand. Conducting further investigation on Chinese undergraduates, who are also Generation Z towards the perception of influencer are useful to tapping into this target market. Past studies have explicitly looked at the influence of beauty and entertainment internet celebrity on purchasing behavior, mostly focusing on the Western countries. These studies concluded that internet celebrities could impact buying decisions and suggest appropriate influencer marketing strategies. However, study on the perceptions about internet celebrities' impact Chinese undergraduates' purchase intention towards non-beauty and non-entertainment recommended products still remain scarce. Therefore, Stimulus-Response Theory, Source Credibility Model and Perceived Interconnectedness Model were used as the research foundation to investigate the influence of credibility and interconnectedness perceptions towards internet celebrity on Chinese undergraduates' purchase intention. Quantitative research using survey questionnaires was designed to collect responses on purchase intention towards internet celebrity's suggested product and perceptions of trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and interconnectedness towards the internet celebrity. A pilot study of 25 respondents was conducted at Xiamen University China to assess the feasibility of the main study. In the main study, a total of 339 responses were collected from Xiamen University, Sichuan University, and Zhengzhou University in China through online. The findings reveal that Chinese undergraduates perceived differently compared with the previous studies. Specifically, attractiveness and interconnectedness of internet celebrities significantly influence Chinese undergraduates' purchase intention. From the results of standard multiple regression analysis, Chinese undergraduates are not concerned about trustworthiness of internet celebrities, at least it is not important to activate their intention to purchase the internet celebrity's recommended product. Besides, meaningful relationship is not found between Chinese undergraduates' purchase intention and expertise of internet celebrities. The inconsistent results between the present and past research might be attributed to respondents' generational cohort

differences cultural differences, country-level institution differences, and the difference among internet celebrities, in terms of their unique styles and characteristics. The findings in this study provides several implications for marketing managers to strategies their influencer marketing. Additionally, the results provide insights tor entrepreneurs who intend to start or have already run an e-commerce business in China. Marketers should collaborate with celebrities to develop brand loyalty among their undergraduate followers. Specifically, the marketers should select influencers who are attractive and can connect well with their followers as the two main criteria in attracting Chinese undergraduates' interest toward the recommended product.

Keywords: *Attractiveness, China, Expertise, Interconnectedness, Internet Celebrity, Purchase Intention, Trustworthiness, Undergraduates*